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RESOURCE PUBLICATION No. 2

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# MEDIA RELATIONS

Helpful suggestions for school boards and trustees to be effective communicators to the public through the print and electronic media in both pro-active and re-active situations.

*November, 1991*

ONTARIO PUBLIC SCHOOL BOARDS' ASSOCIATION

# RESOURCE PUBLICATION No. 2

There are many good publications and professionals trustees and board staff can turn to when seeking advice on media relations. In preparing this publication, we are not attempting to duplicate the very sound advice which is available from such sources. We have tried to apply the generic "do's and don't's" of media relations to the functions of school boards based on contributions from media relations specialists in the school board community. While many of the suggestions and tips contained in this publication deal with the boards, we have also included some media relations pointers for trustees.

This resource publication does not address every situation in which specific media relations tips might apply. It does offer suggestions on five major situations/issues which will help boards and trustees gain: (a) the upper edge in media relations; (b) an understanding of the environment in which the media work; and (c) advantages in shaping not only the media's perceptions of school boards and trustees, but also the information and opinions they relay to the public.

The purpose of this resource publication is to provide helpful suggestions for school boards and trustees to be effective communicators to the public through the print and electronic media in both pro-active and re-active situations. We suggest that this resource publication be made available to trustees, school board staff responsible for communications and media relations and supervisory officers who have been assigned media relations duties.

Resource Publications are a series of publications designed to facilitate sharing of information, ideas and strategies among public school boards on key issues, topics and trends in public education. Your comments on Resource Publications and suggestions for future topics are welcome.

Please forward your comments and suggestions to:

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Previous RESOURCE PUBLICATION No. 1 provided communications suggestions and ideas for school boards to help explain 1990 budget and tax increases and funding issues. Published by the Ontario Public School Boards' Association, in April 1990.

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# RESOURCE PUBLICATION No. 2

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PART I

# HANDLING A CRISIS SITUATION

ONTARIO PUBLIC SCHOOL BOARDS' ASSOCIATION

# HANDLING A CRISIS SITUATION

Defining a crisis situation is difficult because, like beauty, it is often in the eye of the beholder. What is a crisis situation to one school board may be a difficult situation for another. However you wish to define it some situations cannot be predicted. A shooting on school property; a member of school staff charged with a criminal offense; and, a leak of sensitive financial or personal information, are all crisis situations in which the media will want a response from the board. Here are some tips for handling media in these and other crisis situations.

## NEVER IGNORE AN ISSUE

An issue is an unresolved matter heading toward decision. Never ignore an issue and hope it will go away; chances are, it won't. In its early or emerging stages, an issue may present an excellent public relations opportunity. At this point it may take the form of a single complaint or concern and may involve only one or two persons. This is the ideal time to deflate the issue by dealing with it before it gains momentum. An issue which is ignored soon matures, attracts more attention and becomes legitimized as support for it from local groups and community leaders becomes organized and established. As an issue peaks and becomes a crisis, the chance of settling it to your advantage is greatly diminished. A crisis has three common elements: a trigger or unexpected event which has the potential to alter perceptions about your organization; a threat which is posed by the triggering event; and the potential to cause permanent damage to the image or structure of your organization. A crisis compresses many events into a short period while, at the same time, it magnifies the responses of people. When an issue reaches crisis proportions, control will be taken out of your hands for a period of time. This should be avoided at all costs.

## MAINTAIN CONTROL OF THE PUBLICITY

In order to manage a crisis, you must maintain control over the publicity generated by the media. To exert this control, you must first understand the media. Media representatives may be reporters, editors, producers, researchers, photographers or anchor persons who work for newspapers, magazines, radio stations or television stations. Most (particularly in small towns or rural areas) are hired directly from community college or university journalism courses; many have limited qualifications beyond a willingness to work long hours for little pay. Usually, they are provided with little or no on the job training.

There are a number of practises which media representatives may consider ethical, but which you may not. They may tape interviews without telling you; they will not allow you to see their story before it is published; they may attempt to interview relatives of dead or injured persons; they may enter private property to get a photo or interview; or they may not tell you about previous interviews with others. Even if you have cultivated your local media representatives, you likely will be unfamiliar with the major media representatives who arrive on your doorstep in times of crisis. It is critical, therefore, that you develop a plan to lead you through the inevitable media encounters.

## APPOINT A SPOKESPERSON

Decide who should speak to the media and who should not, then stick to it. The spokesperson you choose should be aware of what the media knows about your organization, and you should know how he or she feels about the media. The spokesperson should appear relaxed, calm, confident and credible in order to create strategic advantage for your organization. Reporters often will attempt to elicit answers from the heart, not the head, so the spokesperson should be comfortable dealing only with current policy and never speculating or offering personal opinions about the event.

## BUY YOURSELF SOME TIME

In the unpredictable crisis, the call from a reporter may be the first you hear of an event. If you are the spokesperson for your organization, you know that trying to answer questions without having any time to gather all the available information and prepare your responses could have disastrous results. You need to buy yourself some time. The best way to do this is to ask the reporter exactly what he or she wishes to know about the situation. You can be sure the reporter's deadline is "now" so tell the reporter you will get back to them as quickly as possible. Now you have time, even if it's only a few minutes, to find out all you need to know about the situation and put together a plan which will show your organization in the best possible light.

## ISSUING NEWS RELEASES

The most difficult question to face when confronted with a crisis is whether to issue a news release - in effect, to initiate media coverage of the crisis - or to sit back in hopes that the crisis will blow over without any damaging media coverage, with the exception that you will answer any media inquiries that come your way.

Obviously, you don't want to encourage news coverage of negative events; but neither do you want to lose control when the media do get hold of a potentially harmful story. The fact is, the first significant media coverage of a crisis situation will set the tone of the media coverage that will follow.

Here's an example: An elementary teacher is charged with sexually assaulting a student.

Under one scenario, the breaking story in *The Toronto Star* talks of a possible cover-up because the principal and the school board tried to hush up the incident or it quotes an anonymous source - perhaps an irate parent - complaining about alleged previous complaints of sexual or other abuse. You are now put squarely on the defensive, plagued with the impossible task of proving that you did not attempt a cover-up or that no previous valid complaints were ever made. In such a situation, you have lost control; the subsequent media coverage will likely focus on your alleged shortcomings and thus cause serious damage to your reputation.

Under another scenario, the initial media coverage focuses on the principal's decisive action to bring the alleged culprit to justice and to protect the victim and other students. Here the line separating the good

guys from the bad guys is clearly - and more properly - drawn, with the alleged abuser on one side and you - the school or the school board - on the other. Your reputation will not only emerge intact from the crisis, it may actually be enhanced, as you are portrayed by the media as responsible, caring and perhaps even courageous community leaders.

The key question is how to discourage the first scenario and encourage the second.

As with all aspects of media relations, there are no guarantees; all you can really do is nudge the odds in your favour. So to increase the chances of getting neutral, and possibly even positive, media coverage during a crisis, make sure your first decision - whether to initiate media coverage or hold off and let the media come to you - is the right one. To help you make that decision, initiate media coverage whenever *all* of the following criteria are met:

1. The media are likely to find out about the crisis situation on their own.
2. It's newsworthy, so when they do find out about it, they will report it.
3. You may not have the opportunity to set the tone of the initial media coverage, either because the story might be reported without your being asked for comment or because the reporter may be influenced against you by other sources.

## PREDICT AND PREPARE

Before media representatives arrive on the scene you should predict their questions and prepare your possible responses. The first thing you must do is prepare a description of the event, including the basic, WHO, WHAT, WHERE, WHY, WHEN and HOW MUCH. From this, choose the most important aspects you wish to be stressed in the interview. Choose a focus or angle to dominate your description. Often, if you do this, reporters will accept it as being the most important angle of the story and they will not bother to look for a focus of their own.

Next, prepare a list of positives about the event. Because most reporters ask questions which elicit negative responses, you must find ways to bring your list of positives out in the interview. Prepare a list of negatives too. Negatives can be minimized by well thought out answers prepared in advance of the interview.

## TELL YOUR SIDE OF THE STORY

Now that you have chosen a focus for the story and have prepared a description and a list of positives and negatives about the event, you are ready for the interview. It is best to get your side of the story out first, but it will be difficult to do this in a question and answer interview format. To the first questions of the reporter/interviewer, try to reiterate your key points in your answer. An attempt to completely ignore the first question to give a description of events may needlessly antagonize a reporter. For example, there has been a fire at one of your schools. If the first question probes the cause of the fire, you should begin by saying politely, "Let me come back to that in a moment, I just want to indicate that the school has been safely evacuated and there are no injuries to any children and staff." Or you can say,

"That is still undetermined, but I can tell you that the school was safely and quickly evacuated and there are no injuries to students and staff."

The key point here is to try to keep the media always on your side and avoid risking actions that will antagonize reporters or make you or your spokesperson appear unwilling or suspicious.

Whenever possible, work a positive into your responses. By the time the negative questions arise, you will have stated your description of the event, established a number of positive points and set the focus for the reporter.

## BE CREDIBLE AND CONFIDENT

It will be important, particularly if you find yourself in front of a television camera, to establish your credibility and your control. Always stand or sit erect, establish eye contact with the interviewer or the camera, use your hands to make occasional gestures and modulate your voice to create more interest. Don't slouch, fidget, stare at your shoes or speak in a timid monotone. Don't be pushy, noticeably aggressive, hostile or smug. Avoid wearing solid black or green, busy patterns, loud colours, herringbones or tweeds, flashy jewellery or a white shirt or blouse.

Similarly, if you find a radio station's microphone in front of you, don't panic. You don't have to blurt out a hasty answer just because the tape is running. Take your time formulating a proper response. "Dead Air," or gaps in the tape between questions and answers, will be edited out before your comments are aired on radio. In most cases, reporters are only looking for a 10 or 15 second quote anyway, and the bulk of the interview won't ever be broadcast.

## NEVER SAY ...

Never say anything you don't want to be quoted. If the reporter uses inflammatory words such as tragic or dangerous in a question, do not repeat them in an answer. You may be quoted as if you initiated the words.

Never say "off the record." There is no such thing. Anything you say may be used or quoted. Remember, reporters have a job to do and if you give them information that enhances their story, they are obligated to report it in order to do their job well and responsibly.

Never say "no comment." If you are not in a position to give out more information, say why. If you don't know the answer, volunteer to get the information and contact the reporter before deadline time. If you refuse to comment at all, the reporter will surely find someone else, perhaps a disgruntled employee, who will comment but would not be the best spokesperson for your organization.

Never say a simple "yes" or "no" in response to a question. This allows the reporter to quote the question as your answer. Always phrase a reply in your own words.

## RESPECT THE MEDIA

Attempt to establish positive relationships with the media. Respect the fact that they have a job to do and that their work may not show your organization to the best advantage. Don't try to tell a reporter how to write a story; it's your responsibility to present the event in a positive manner and control the interview in a less obvious manner.

Be honest, accurate, friendly and frank. Be available and accessible to all media and don't play favourites. Don't blame reporters for things they didn't do; remember, editors write headlines, reporters don't. Always admit your mistakes; it will firmly establish your credibility with media representatives. Respect news deadlines; they may put pressure on you, but they put even more pressure on the reporter.

## GET TO THE POINT

Respond promptly to media inquiries. Get to the point of your story. Be brief and concise; you are more likely to be quoted accurately if your answers are short and quotable rather than long and unfocussed. Don't respond to hypothetical questions; they are guaranteed to get you into trouble. Don't hide information that can be shared; you appear more credible to the media if you give them all the available information.

Avoid jargon. This is one of the most aggravating things to reporters and their audiences. Tell your story in plain English, without the dubious benefit of fancy "academic" words that mean absolutely nothing to people not directly involved in the area of concern. Lastly, be ready for the interview; don't keep a reporter waiting any longer than you would keep your boss waiting. It's rude and, most of the time, completely unnecessary.

PART II

# GETTING GOOD NEWS OUT

ONTARIO PUBLIC SCHOOL BOARDS' ASSOCIATION

# GETTING GOOD NEWS OUT

When looking for media coverage, consider some of the questions listed below to help you determine if your story is newsworthy. Look for an angle that makes your event or activity more interesting. Ask reporters what they feel is newsworthy, or what they would prefer to write about. The media are in competition with each other and are looking for ways to make the same story more interesting.

1. Is it new? Reporters are trained to discover what is new in the world each day. The story can be an old theme with a new twist, a spin-off of a trend.

2. Does it have a David versus Goliath theme? A grade 3 student beats the odds and receives special recognition.

3. Is it political in nature? Has there been great public or political interest in a specific program offered at your school.

4. Is it unusual or different? It just doesn't happen every day.

5. Does it affect and influence many people? A recycling project that involves students and the community.

6. Is it an emotional issue? Could this event or circumstance affect all of us in some way?

7. Does the event or activity relate to a major news story? The media like to localize major news stories when possible. For example, NASA distributes tomato seeds from space to local schools, or your acid rain project confirms data recently reported by a major research group.

8. Is the news close to home? The closer to home, the more interesting the story. The media are interested in polls and surveys that give opinions or data on just about any subject, for example, the lack of discipline in schools or the dropout rate. How do these statistics relate to your school or our school system?

9. Does it involve crisis, conflict, controversy or conspiracy? It may not be good news, but it sure gets their attention. Many times comparisons are made between the policies and practices on different school systems. Be prepared for the media and think about how your school or school system prevented or successfully dealt with a related crisis or controversy.

10. Is it superlative? Does your story illustrate the fastest, highest, smallest, or biggest of something.

11. Is it visually entertaining? Does your story have visual appeal for television video and for photographs in newspapers.

# DEALING WITH CONTROVERSY
## *(At The Board Table)*

Controversy can develop around school board issues very quickly, sometimes literally overnight. Controversy can be sparked by a variety of sources: regional disparities, media coverage, ministry announcements, board decisions, public questions, student reactions. Even routine operations can become controversial when they are the focal point of public scrutiny.

Sometimes issues flare up, are dealt with quickly, and are just as quickly forgotten. Other issues lie dormant, or smoulder just under the surface, ready to break out at any time. "Fighting the fires" is a true test of the democratic process for both individual trustees and for school boards.

During the life of an issue, you may be bombarded by parents, ratepayers and the media. How do you present both your position and the board's decision - especially if the two are in conflict?

## EXPECT CONTROVERSY AND PLAN FOR IT

Before you have to face a difficult topic across the board table, develop an understanding of your board's procedure on issues management. Trustees should have a simple process to follow when dealing with conflicting opinions both before, during and after the issue arises. Make sure you understand your board protocol on who speaks to the media, what information should be made available to the spokesperson on sensitive issues, and what censure you will face if you choose not to follow traditional practices.

## PRESENT YOUR POSITION AT THE BOARD TABLE

Many issues need a proper debate at the political level. Before your board tables its position, make sure your voice is heard. Your opinion may or may not be the popular one, but the democratic process ensures your right to express it.

## RESEARCH YOUR ARGUMENT

While rhetoric and emotion are one way to express your ideas, stating your case with carefully researched information provides a strong framework for your position. Tie your viewpoint to objectives stated by your board, your Mission Statement, historical precedence, and documented statistics.

## RESPECT OPPOSING OPINIONS

Every person is entitled to an individual viewpoint on issues. Each trustee should feel comfortable to express his/her opinion in an honest, open forum. Support open debate as a positive approach to decision-making.

PART III

# DEALING WITH CONTROVERSY
## *(At The Board Table)*

ONTARIO PUBLIC SCHOOL BOARDS' ASSOCIATION

## PRESENT A POSITIVE IMAGE OF YOUR BOARD

Controversy can be divisive. You want your board to be recognized as a progressive organization that allows for healthy individual and community dialogue. Emphasize your willingness to continue to work on behalf of students and ratepayers with your other board members.

## DON'T CONTINUE THE DEBATE ONCE IT'S OVER

When a decision has been reached, it becomes the board's position. Use your board's process for re-consideration, but don't drag the issue out longer than its logical conclusion, particularly in the media. It is tempting to wage a war of words in the media if the opportunity is presented, but avoid it!

## DON'T TAKE ISSUES TO A PERSONAL LEVEL

You may refute another trustee's argument, but never deny his/her right to make a statement. Respect your fellow trustees as people. Never take a debate beyond the confines of the issue to comments about the individual.

## DON'T FORGET TRUSTEES ARE PEOPLE TOO

Your colleagues are human beings with frailties, feelings and egos involved. Controversial issues are often emotional issues. During a debate trustees have delivered passionate arguments both for and against the topic. Particularly if their opinion has been defeated, people need to know you still care about them as friends and colleagues.

## DON'T BECOME A RENEGADE OVER A SINGLE ISSUE

If you allow one issue to cloud your judgment, you may not be able to develop solid support for your positions on different topics. Maintaining your credibility and your allies for the duration of your term in office is important. You will need the support of your colleagues when other issues are debated.

## DON'T BURN YOUR BRIDGES BEHIND YOU

Never push an issue beyond the point of no return. If you stake your career as a trustee on one decision, you may face either political or personal embarrassment. Avoid making such statements as "If this doesn't pass I'll resign" or "I refuse to participate on a board with this policy." Someone may remember your words and expect you to act upon them!

# COMMUNICATING THE BUDGET: TIPS FOR WINNING PUBLIC SUPPORT

Each year, one of the spring rituals is the final approval of the school board budget. And each year the public becomes increasingly interested in knowing how the tax dollars will be spent. How can school boards be prepared to respond to the angry and frustrated taxpayer? How can a board develop public understanding and support for the budget?

Following are eight helpful strategies for communicating budget information:

## BUDGET COMMUNICATION SHOULD BE ONGOING AND CONTINUOUS

Information should be available before, during and after the budget deliberation process.

- Before the budget process, talk about how the budget will be drafted, including opportunities for public input. Discuss how the budget is spent, budget pressures and issues.

- During the process, highlight issues and concerns facing the board.

- After the budget is set make sure that the public understands the implications - for the board and the individual taxpayer. Highlight any plans for future action such as budget planning, cost cutting measures, strategic planning etc.

## EFFECTIVE BUDGET COMMUNICATION BEGINS AT HOME

School employees are the best ambassadors for the board. They need to understand the budget issues and be prepared to answer public inquiries. If staff members are not supportive and well informed about the budget this will erode the confidence of community and parents. Board employees are seen as the experts, since they work in the schools the community expects them to be knowledgeable about a range of educational issues-especially the budget.

## KEEP THE MESSAGES SIMPLE

Education budgets are very complicated and intimidating. If the public does not understand educational and financial jargon, they will become frustrated and distrustful. When writing or talking about the budget use plain words and talk in terms of students and learning. Clearly spell out the impact that the budget will have on children.

PART IV

# COMMUNICATING THE BUDGET: TIPS FOR WINNING PUBLIC SUPPORT

ONTARIO PUBLIC SCHOOL BOARDS' ASSOCIATION

## BUILD IN OPPORTUNITIES FOR PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT AND INPUT

Parents and other community members need opportunities to learn more about the budget and offer ideas and comments. As one philosopher said "When people own a piece of the rock they are invested." We need to help the public become invested in education. They need to have a chance to ask questions and have their views heard.

## RESEARCH SHOWS THAT AN AUDIENCE NEEDS TO HEAR A MESSAGE AT LEAST TWELVE TIMES BEFORE THEY DEVELOP AN AWARENESS OR UNDERSTANDING

When communicating budget information, that means that one article or presentation will not be enough to build public support. Use a variety of communication strategies: brochures, community and parent newsletters; annual report; media releases and interviews; prepared articles for community and school newsletters; provide budget presentations to parent, ratepayer and community group meetings; employee newsletters; fact sheets available at municipal buildings; articles in the continuing education brochure.

## THE MEDIA WILL PLAY A BIG ROLE IN BUDGET COMMUNICATION

Like it or not, local newspapers will carry play by play descriptions of the budget development. While you can not control the media, a board can certainly take steps to manage the relationship with the media.

- Don't wait for a crisis to develop a relationship with the media. Meet with media representatives on an ongoing basis. In the midst of heated budget debate, it's too late to build trust and understanding.

- Don't wait for the media to come to you. Go on the offensive with your budget stories. Provide the media with a background session on the budget, make complete budget materials available as early as possible. Before the budget process is in full swing, offer the media a relaxed opportunity for a question and answer session on budget development.

- Designate a media spokesperson, someone who will be readily accessible to answer questions and provide comment.

- Treat all media representatives equally and don't play favourites with reporters that you believe may write a more positive story. Be open and truthful with all media inquiries.

## BE OPEN, HONEST AND NON-DEFENSIVE IN ALL BUDGET COMMUNICATION

Share the good news as well as the bad. The public will assume that the board manages its finances the same way it communicates. In other words, if the public perceives the board is not truthful, they will be concerned about how wisely the tax dollars are spent. A board earns trust and support when the public believes that communication (and management) is up front and honest.

## DON'T LEAVE COMMUNICATION TO CHANCE

Develop and adopt a year long budget communications plan. Make sure that the plan is not an orphan, without anyone to care and tend for it. Assign the communication responsibility to one person.

During the budget process, public attention focuses on education. Through planned communication, use this opportunity to turn public attention into public understanding and support.

PART V

# MEDIA AND EDUCATION FINANCE ISSUES: BUILDING BRIDGES

ONTARIO PUBLIC SCHOOL BOARDS' ASSOCIATION

# MEDIA AND EDUCATION FINANCE ISSUES: BUILDING BRIDGES

The road to winning public support for board decisions relating to spending is made easier by building bridges of cooperation and understanding with the media and other levels of government. How many times has your municipal council raked your board over the coals for over spending and increasing local taxes? What about your MPPs and MPs? Do community and ratepayer groups applaud tough decisions of the board related to spending priorities or hurrel accusations of overspending?

The November election has increased media interest in all aspects of board decisions and functions and individual actions of trustees, especially those that involve taxpayers' money will intensify. It is important that the credibility of your school system and the integrity of your school board as a public institution remain in good standing in the post-election era.

## DEVELOP A MEDIA RELATIONS POLICY

Have an effective media relations policy in place to communicate your budget and other financial issues and decisions to the public. Remember that the average reporter does not understand the complexity of issues, especially education finance any better than the average ratepayer. Do your best to assist the reporter(s) and editors of your local media outlets because the mass media is the most influential means of communicating with your public. It's smarter to help a reporter understand the story than to try to correct the mistakes once they get broadcasted or printed. When it comes to spending, draft a media release setting out the budget highlights in simple, understandable terms. Make sure your spokesperson (board chair or finance chair or director) is prepared to answer follow-up questions and provide interviews.

## WORK WITH YOUR MUNICIPAL COUNCIL

Establish a good liaison with your municipal council. While there is a traditional competition between councils and school boards, it is to the boards' advantage to have councillors and municipal staff who understand the local education budget. A good relationship between the two bodies may result in an agreement by council to include the board's budget fact sheet or pamphlet in the municipal tax bill mailing. Councillors are less apt to bad mouth the trustees if they understand how the education mill rate is set. For example, explain the parts of the budget which are consumed by programs and services mandated by the province (smaller class sizes, employee health tax, pay equity etc.)

## WORK WITH YOUR PROVINCIAL AND FEDERAL REPRESENTATIVES

A working relationship with MPPs and MPs is a good investment. What these people think about the local public schools can affect public opinion - and your effectiveness in lobbying for grants. Provincial and federal politicians are less likely to lash-out against school boards and school systems if reasonable attempts are made to involve them in solving problems and issues which confront the school system. When tackling broader social problems which challenge schools, such as violence, drug abuse, child abuse, racism and sexism, invite your MPPs and MPs to sit as observers on advisory committees or task forces aimed at developing board policies or proactive strategies for dealing with social issues in schools.

## WORK WITH THE COMMUNITY

Community outreach is important. The public school system needs more cheerleaders and budget time offers an ideal opportunity for trustees and senior staff to participate in media interviews (talk shows, phone-in shows etc.), public speaking opportunities with local service clubs, business and professional associations, cultural groups, home and school associations, senior citizens' organizations etc. Many of these groups are in great need of public speakers for their regular or special meetings. Using the excuse of explaining how your local schools are financed, take the opportunity to tell your ratepayers what a great job your local schools are doing for your community. Even better, invite these people into the schools so they can see for themselves. Invite your MPP, local publisher, etc. Good news travels fast!

## BE THOROUGH

Answer your critics and encourage your supporters. Don't let unfair or inaccurate criticism go without comment. News reports, letters to the editor, editorial comments, accusations by other elected officials, teachers' representatives etc. which are not responded to are automatically considered by the public to be correct. Encourage your supporters to speak out, as well. Official board responses will be seen to be the opinions of vested interests. Parents, business people, students and community leaders who speak out in support of your school system will have an especially positive effect on public opinion.

## BE POSITIVE

Always direct your comments to how your system is serving its students. Educators too often fall into the trap of talking about policies and services, GLGs and capital programs and forget to relate this to how they benefit the students involved. If a critic challenges the costs of ESL, talk about the individual kids you have dealt with who would be left behind if such programs were not available. Volunteer that special education costs more but remind the public of the extraordinary services being provided to young people who in earlier generations would be locked away and denied such opportunities. Relate everything to students and their families and the community as a whole.

## HAVE YOUR HOME IN ORDER

Carefully scrutinize all your board policies and expenditures. Do nothing, support nothing and advocate nothing that will embarrass you or your board if it is reported on page one of your local newspaper. Expense accounts, out of town conferences, meal policies, money spent on administration facilities and anything else the public might consider a "frill" will be closely monitored by your local media and critics. Millions of dollars spent or saved on carefully crafted programs will go unnoticed and unreported; a few hundred dollars on a junket or meal or conference that has not been properly connected to professional development has the potential of making page one and dragging down the board and the school system's image.

## AVOID MUDSLINGING

Think twice before you try to grab an easy headline or ingratiate yourself to a reporter by attacking a colleague on the board or someone else in the political arena. We all live in glass houses. Similarly, while it's fair to point out the shortfall in support for education by the federal and provincial governments, remember that the public is sick of buck passing. The taxpayers care not which government's hand is removing the money. All they know and care about is that there is little left these days when all levels of government get through with them. Be proactive, instead of being negative about others, be positive about what your board is doing for the young people and the future of your community.

PART VI

# GENERAL MEDIA RELATIONS TIPS FOR SCHOOL TRUSTEES

ONTARIO PUBLIC SCHOOL BOARDS' ASSOCIATION

# GENERAL MEDIA RELATIONS TIPS FOR SCHOOL TRUSTEES

- Strictly speaking, nothing is "off the record" and everything you say can be published and broadcasted. Sticking to this rule is the best advise. If you choose to speak "off the record" make sure it is with a reporter with whom you have established an understanding and some ground rules for interviews which you both will respect and honour. However, even if you know and trust a reporter, "off the record" interviews or statements must be handled with care and caution and should not become a habit in your media relations style. Don't become, or become known as a "broad informant."

- If you choose to avoid "off the record" statements, a good rule of thumb is to assume everything you say to a reporter, even in a social situation, may appear in print.

- Seize opportunities to focus on your key points or reiterate your position. Don't "overkill" and don't purposely ignore a question to simply make your point. This will only irritate the reporter.

- If you don't know the answers to a question say so - and make sure you call the reporter back with the answer/information.

- Reporters appreciate cooperative, accurate and available sources.

- Avoid technical education jargon. It can confuse the reporter and does not serve to help the public understand your points.

- Try to get to know reporters covering your board and their news organizations. View the media as a natural group you must deal with, just like parents, teachers and ratepayers. Dealing with the media is part of the job. Be helpful. Give the media your home telephone number.

- Don't ask the reporter to see story before it's published.

- Political leaders are human - they make mistakes, like everybody else. Generally, being upfront about admitting to an error in judgement with a reporter will serve you better than having it uncovered by a reporter.

- There is nothing wrong with telling reporters they did a good job on a story, particularly if the story involved a complicated issue.

- A publicly elected trustee is not as free as a private citizen to determine what is or is not confidential information since trustees are accountable to the public and so much of the board's business is done in full view of the public and the media. Use the board's corporate guidelines to help determine confidential information. If a reporter asks you to provide information that is deemed to be of a contoversial nature, such as personnel information about board or school employees, indicate to the reporter in a firm but

polite manner that the information is confidential. Always remember, school boards, although public institutions, are subject to statutes dealing with privacy of information. If asked about the status of the board's ongoing collective negotiations, check with the trustee heading the board's bargaining committee or the Director of Education to determine whether such information could jeopardize the board's (which is also the public's) position in negotiations.

- Apart from providing confidential information, you can never go wrong by always telling the truth to a reporter.

- When you have time before an interview, practice your answers by posing questions - the easy ones and the tough ones. Always prepare for challenging questions. Check facts and figures too.

- For TV and radio interviews keep your answers shorter, and to the point. Practice keeping your answers between 20 to 30 seconds in length. Once you've made your point, end your comments and let the reporter ask another question.

## ADDITIONAL TIPS FOR TV INTERVIEWS
## (Extracts from *Managing the Media*, Ed Shiller, 1989.)

- Your demeanor should be open, comfortable and relaxed, with the degree of seriousness appropriate to the topic.

- Dress appropriately and neatly.

    - Avoid flashy colours and strong, complex patterns.

    - Clothing should be clean and unwrinkled.

    - If the interview is in your office, you may want to be in your shirtsleeves to project an honest, friendly and hard-working image, but keep your collar buttoned up and your tie properly knotted.

    - If the interview is outside your office, wear the clothing appropriate to the surroundings.

- Look at the interviewer, not the camera.

- Don't squint from possibly harsh TV lights - it'll make you look evasive.

- Minimize movements - your face and torso will fill up most of the TV screen and any body movements will appear greatly exaggerated.

- If you're seated at a desk, lean slightly forward with your back straight, your forearms resting on the table and your hands clasped.

- If you're sitting in a stool or chair with no desk or table in front of you, cross your legs, with clasped hands resting on your lap.

- If you're standing, relax, but don't slouch, keeping your feet about six inches apart, with one foot slightly ahead of the other.

    - You may put one hand in your trouser pocket with the other arm hanging at your side or slightly bent at the elbow.

    - Or you may have your arms in front of your body, with one hand hooking over the back of the other.

- Hide any sensitive or confidential papers - the eye of the camera sees all.

- Ensure that the setting projects the appropriate image of your organization.